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ABSTRACT

Career development and awareness issues for visually impaired students are explored. The developmental nature of career development is analyzed. Career development is seen as a lifelong process beginning with the parents and proceeding with prevocational activities at the elementary level. Changing emphases at the junior high level and the high school level are noted. The contributions of vocational counselors and school guidance counselors are considered. Also discussed are the benefits of summer work experience programs. In addition, the need for teamwork among parents, teachers, vocational instructors, mobility instructors, medical personnel and others is stressed. (CL)

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CAREER AWARENESS AND PREPARATION: A GROUP EFFORT

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Career awareness and preparation have often been lumped together under the term career education, and treated as a single course in High School. In fact, career development is a lifelong process. It may include paid or unpaid work, it is productive in nature, and requires some independence and maturity on the part of the worker.

For the visually handicapped child, career development involves many people who form a network of support, instruction, and direction. The parents, volunteers, and professionals must work together as an open group where they share information, expertise, and responsibility to ensure that a visually handicapped student is prepared for a beginning career.

Career awareness involves a realistic understanding of oneself in relation to the world of work. Self awareness includes one's interests, temperaments, aptitudes and values, all of which combine to build a positive self identity. Career awareness includes basic education in reading, writing and math, as well as science, social studies and other elementary subjects. It involves an awareness of a variety of careers and the skills required to be successful in a career. It involves an awareness of the economic benefits of work.

Career preparation includes an application of these educational skills and aptitudes. It involves the practice and the use of social and communication skills in order to secure and hold a beginning job. The ability to make rational, intelligent choices concerning an entry position into employment or into further education is one of the main aims of early career development.

One other critical aspect in career development for the visually handicapped is that blind or visually impaired persons may have to be better at whatever they do to convince many people today that they can handle a job. When asked about the reasons for their success, successfully employed blind people have indicated that in their experience better than average training was necessary. (Kenmore, Davidson, 1981).

How do we ensure this better training, decision making ability, career preparation, and awareness of self? It is a long term developmental sequence and will require the concentrated efforts of many people. This group of people includes parents, doctors, preschool workers, ophthalmologists, optometrists, teachers, aides, counsellors, principals, volunteer groups, rehabilitation workers, ultimately employers and the business community, and of course the visually impaired person. It is a large and diverse group that rarely if ever meets together at one time but the accumulated knowledge and experience must be communicated and made available to all. Each individual, parent, volunteer or professional has special insights, expertise, and personal knowledge which enhances the career development of a visually handicapped youngster. However, with such a diverse group that spans a long period of time, there is a danger of assuming that "the other person" is looking after or is responsible for the basic needs of the visually handicapped person.

What are these basic needs? A recent evaluation of visually handicapped clients entering a rehabilitation program indicated some characteristics which would contribute to successful employment or future vocational training. These basic factors in order of importance were:

1. Home management skills.
2. Previous employment experience.
3. Age (above thirty years old).
4. High school education or better.
5. High level of career maturity (Springfield, Van Der Kolk, 1984).

All of these aspects are components for successful career development, but surely we, as a group, can attain most of these goals in less than thirty years. All of these factors can and should be introduced if not fully achieved in the earlier stages of career development.

This group effort by people working toward independence and career maturity must include the education of those well meaning persons who themselves have not yet come to terms with visual impairment, and who are over protective or misguided in their approach to supporting a visually handicapped person's growth and independence. An individual who is visually handicapped, yet has good self identity and awareness and can demonstrate relative independence and abilities in the home and workplace, will ultimately educate employers and the public at large.

The lifelong process begins at home with the parents. They must come to terms with the fact that their child is or has become visually impaired. They are the first to address this special circumstance of their child and to take action in ensuring as normal development as possible for their child. But parents need help and are assisted initially by doctors, ophthalmologists and other medical personnel. This initial core group expands to include preschool workers and other child care professionals who may assist in training parents to implement early intervention programs that allow a visually impaired child to develop early independence and social behaviors.

During early childhood, parent support groups offer moral support and practical suggestions to help parents achieve goals and to recognize successes in severely multihandicapped children. Help and guidance of the group, parents efforts in early stimulation and establishing independent activities are most important. Independent personal hygiene and eating skills, good grooming, and appropriate dressing techniques need to be taught in early childhood.

Parents can begin elementary prevocational activities by assigning small tasks and supervising regular responsibilities appropriate to the age of the child. Cooking, baking, small cleaning and maintenance jobs or hobbies earn the child satisfaction or praise for a job well done. The beginnings of responsibility and independence are nurtured; natural skills and abilities are noticed and encouraged by the parents.

Obviously sensitive, supporting parents quickly become vital to the co-operation, planning and direction of a group effort aimed at individual career development for their youngster. Their realism and input based upon first hand knowledge of their child is most important in guiding other group members. But the degree of parental expectations is set early. Doctors, ophthamologists and specialists play a crucial role in advising and supporting parents upon recognition of a severe visual impairment. Since visual impairment is a low incidence handicap many general practitioners may be unfamiliar with available specialized services. The medical community and support agencies such as the CNIB have a responsibility to ensure that their services and clinics are advertised regularly.

Doctors remain as consulting members of the group throughout career development. Over the long term, families call upon medical specialists for prescriptions of aids, referral for specialized services, and possibly recommendations for educational placement.

An important indicator of career maturity is the ability of a visually handicapped person to explain his or her visual handicap in medical and functional terms to a potential employer. (Dickson, 1982). Ophthamologists and optometrists are the most qualified to explain particular visual conditions in terms that students can relate to and understand.

When a child reaches school age, the group of parents, medical, technical, and social workers gains some new members. Teachers, aides, principals, and other school personnel become actively involved in the career development process. School programs for multihandicapped children build upon self help and independence achieved to date, depending on the ability level and development of the child. Self awareness activities continue in the social context of a peer group in the more formal school setting. Elementary activities such as sharing and discussion of personal differences, including those of the visually impaired child in the group can benefit all the children by fostering understanding, co-operation, and acceptance of individual differences. These elementary school activities allow all youngsters, including visually impaired, an opportunity to begin to develop a realistic understanding of others. Opportunities for groups to explore likes and dislikes, abilities, and work values, lead to successful performance with peers and a commitment to school.

In later stages of elementary career education, career awareness activities can begin with a discussion of parents or neighbours roles, class visitors and speakers from the community. Visitors should include handicapped adults who can discuss with the class, work related experience and training. Field visits to work sites of class visitors is a valuable follow up activity.

At the Junior High level, the group of professionals supporting career development shifts once again. Career development activities broaden to include more diversified or specialized subjects such as economics, industrial education, home economics, typing, etc. New materials, methods, and demands are placed on a visually handicapped student. Work habits, attitudes, individual strengths and weaknesses that have been established are refined and tested in new class and group situations. More emphasis on adaptive aids to accomplish specialized tasks may require the input of low vision specialists and rehabilitation personnel.

Responsibilities for the student increase; children are working towards independence, skills for personal hygiene, clothing care and mobility. Further goals of independent living such as meal planning, budgeting, banking, and shopping require the input and planning effort of parents, teachers and students. Too often these basic skills are overlooked because one group member assumes the others are covering them.

Peer discussion, pressures, attitudes and opinions become important at this stage as future career goals and decisions loom closer.

A good magazine for discussion about career information and topics of interest to this age group is Life Prints (Blind Skills Inc., 1981), a recorded Braille large print magazine specifically for visually handicapped youth. Regular departments on careers, adaptive aids, sports and recreation, books and agency information address many of the elements of career development, in a format that is interesting and accessible for students.

At the High School level, career education or exploration has traditionally begun. If elementary self awareness and career awareness has been overlooked there is a gap to fill before career exploration or preparation can begin.

Vocational counsellors, and school guidance counsellors become important group members co-ordinating the efforts of career preparation. Often counsellors are intimately involved in school programming and community liaison activities. However, they may not be familiar with the specific needs and concerns of the visually handicapped. For those counsellors with no previous experience with visually handicapped people there is a possibility that sympathy or pity could impede effective counselling about career decisions that a student needs to make. Many counsellors fear that they are unable to deal effectively with disabled students in an integrated school setting, hence they spend their time on current academic needs rather than future career goals. (Roberts 1983, Jones, Koestler Ed.) Guidance counsellors in public schools need support in recognizing that visually impaired persons are capable of a wide range of careers and not simply stereotyped ones. This information can be partially supplied by role models of successfully employed visually impaired persons. Yet counsellors must be aware that there is no fixed list of jobs that are performed by the visually impaired. Counsellors need to understand the nature of the visual handicap a student may have, but emphasis must be placed on abilities, not disabilities. School and vocational guidance personnel need the informed opinion of all group members - family, medical, volunteers, and professionals.

There is a tendancy for those who give career advice to overestimate the capabilities of visually handicapped young people. (Chapman, 1978, Davidson 1981). It has been suggested "The type of work they would undertake if they were not visually handicapped is perhaps the best measure of the appropriateness of the work in which they actually engage".

The counsellor has a crucial role in exploring the options, with a visually impaired student. Examining the education options and career implications, leading the student through a self analysis of strengths, expectations, limitations - helping to set realistic goals, and clarifying perceptions of self as related to the world of work, are all of paramount importance. The school counsellor has a co-ordinating role to play within the group that has been building awareness and career maturity to date.

Other knowledgeable persons in the group who know the visually handicapped student will assist in this advice and consultation. A thorough assessment plus communication amongst the group, counsellor, and student will ultimately lead to the student making his own decisions regarding career options.

Parents, doctors, career counsellors, volunteers may possibly all contribute suggestions when asked by the student as to the best strategy to enter a particular job or field. Vocational instructors, teachers, counsellors and guidance counsellors need to direct the student to information about occupational requirements, benefits, training, and future outlook for occupational groups. Studying the skills, temperments and worker characteristics are all career awareness activities that help the student to narrow the options and choices.

One proven method of gaining self awareness, testing one's abilities and gaining valuable experience is through short term work placement. Work experience opportunities from family jobs, to in-school jobs, or after school and summer jobs are invaluable opportunities to learn about the world of work. Paid or unpaid, sheltered employment, working for a community group or agency, all of these experiences are equally valuable to a student, depending on his ability level and career maturity.

Work experience tests the many educational and personal/social skills acquired to date; it requires independence, mobility, and maturity. Job seeking skills used in applying for a position, the interview, and follow up, are tested in a real life sense and not simply in a role play classroom situation. The competitiveness of the work

place, employer's demands and evaluation of performance as a worker are motivating situations for students. Often they are pleasantly surprised by praise, sometimes they are faced with failure and need to refine or improve certain skills.

Summer work experience programs for blind and visually impaired students integrated in public schools have reported good results. (Cacich, 1983). It has been shown that many elements of self and career awareness can be explored in a relatively short summer period and be of benefit to all participants. A project (Seeds) sponsored by CNIB Maritime Division gave an opportunity for students to compete, apply for a limited number of positions and gain valuable work experience.

The benefits of such programs include focusing future career goals, making employment connections and heightening community and employer awareness of the capabilities of blind and visually impaired workers. The meaning of phrases like: "The need to be over prepared for the job" or "Better than average training is required for success" take on new importance.

The placement of students into a work setting requires the cumulative efforts, of parents, teachers, vocational instructors, mobility instructors, rehabilitation workers, medical personnel, placement specialists, administrators - the list of group members goes on. The support network and follow up after a placement is necessary to remediate deficiencies and plan new initiatives. Group efforts have become successful when the young visually handicapped person plays a major role in making rational and intelligent career decisions. Good choices, based on a knowledge of self and a realistic awareness of opportunities indicate individual career maturity.

Throughout this discussion I have emphasized the developmental nature of career awareness and the fact that there are many contributors to this process. The support network is vast, the membership of the group or network shifts constantly as environments change and the career development proceeds. Communication amongst such a large and diverse group is important but difficult to achieve. Individuals who have been part of interdisciplinary teams know of the advantages but also the problems in the team process.

The members of a group supporting career development must adopt a transdisciplinary group approach. A transdisciplinary joint team approach assumes the group performs services together. Group members must be willing to share expertise and to educate other members as necessary.

The ideal group encourages open communication among its members, and shares leadership and decision-making responsibilities. It is important for all group members to recognize that one individual or discipline cannot consider and implement all the elements of career development.

Individual personalities, professional rivalry or domination must not be allowed to interfere with the career developmental process. Although parents sometimes see their child with a halo, we must recognize that, "parents and paraprofessionals have more direct contact with a child than any other team members - their contributions should be solicited and valued as much as any other team member's perspective". (Baily, 1984). The task of career development for visually handicapped young people is an important one which demands the efforts and cooperation of many to be successful.

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